

PERSPECTIVE ON POLLUTION

Nasty Plans for Our Drinking Water



San Joaquin Valley agribusiness wants to reopen a sluice of toxic waste leading to the California Aqueduct.

By CARLA BARD

Southern Californians need to know that their already degraded drinking water is going to get worse if the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation and big agricultural interests from the west side of San Joaquin Valley have their way. They plan to reopen a 28-mile section of the concrete-lined ditch known as the San Luis Drain to let farmers dump more agricultural runoff, containing toxic amounts of selenium, heavy metals and pesticides in the San Joaquin River.

The river, poisoned by years of drainage pollution from San Joaquin Valley farms, runs north toward the San Francisco Bay and Sacramento River Delta. There the river water is picked up by pumps at Tracy, put into the California State Aqueduct and sent south to the unsuspecting customers of the Metropolitan Water District.

The State Water Resources Control Board, during my tenure, was concerned about the increasing quantity and toxicity of agricultural drainage coming off factory farms in the western San Joaquin Valley. We feared that toxics would bioaccumulate—gradually accumulate in living tissue—in the Bay/Delta ecosystem and be sent south to Southern California drinking water supplies, so we did not grant a permit to the Bureau of Reclamation to complete the San Luis Drain into the Bay/Delta. Instead, we insisted that the bureau first complete a number of credible studies to prove that agricultural drainage water could be safely funneled into the Delta without harming fisheries, downstream farm water and aqueduct or Bay Area drinking water. The bureau never completed the studies.

In 1983, it was revealed that deaths and deformities of ducks at the Kesterson Wildlife Refuge in western Merced

County were caused by toxic selenium in agricultural drainage water stored in evaporation ponds at the refuge. The scandal forced the Department of the Interior and the Bureau of Reclamation to close the refuge in 1985. When the drain was closed in 1986, Kesterson fell off the front pages and TV screens. Agribusiness on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley found other ways to get rid of its wastes, some of which continue to affect Metropolitan Water District supplies. Some farmers created mini-Kestersons on private land; others continued dumping straight into the San Joaquin River, via drainage ditches through the Grasslands, a historic wetlands area.

In addition to the toxic agricultural drainage pumped to Southern California from the San Joaquin River, farmers now want to pump degraded ground water directly into the California State Aqueduct. If an ordinary citizen were dumping his sewage into someone else's drinking water, there would be an outcry and demands that the authorities immediately stop the pollution. But no agency of the state or federal government has done anything to stop agricultural pollution or protect the aqueduct's precious drinking water.

In 1985, immediately after the Kesterson scandal, I raised the issue of toxic bioaccumulation in Los Angeles drinking water supplies with the Metropolitan Water District. Because there was public concern about drinking water at that time, the MWD greatly increased "grab sampling" of water, monitoring for various pollutants in the state aqueduct and the MWD Pyramid Lake storage facility. However, despite repeated requests, the MWD never agreed to do the kind of fish-tissue sampling that would identify the cumulative effects of small doses of toxic pollutant like selenium, pesticides and heavy metals. Like DDT in Rachel Carson's book "Silent Spring," selenium bioaccumulates in the food chain. The deaths and deformities of fish and ducks at Kesterson are examples of bioaccumulation. The only way to discover if

Southern California drinking water is really safe is to do fish sampling, preferably fish liver testing, as well as sampling of plant and animal life on the bottom of the aqueduct and Pyramid Lake.

Since Kesterson, more than \$200 million in government and private consultant funds has been spent in studies of San Joaquin Valley drainage. It seems we've learned nothing. Southern Californians should be demanding that agribusiness in the San Joaquin Valley follow recommendations of a \$50-million, federal-state management plan released in 1990 for the west side of the San Joaquin Valley. The report was developed by the best scientific and governmental talent available and included a broadly based citizens advisory group. Recommendations included stricter standards for the San Joaquin River; retirement from irrigated agriculture of acreage that produces toxic drainage; pollution control at the source, on farms; water conservation and best management practices for irrigation, along with extensive monitoring, especially in regard to public health. Participating agencies pledged to complete the program. Little has been done and things are getting worse.

Ironically, the plan to reopen a portion of the San Luis Drain is being pitched as an environmental solution to the pollution problems affecting migratory birds. It may help the birds, but it is not good for the San Joaquin River, downstream farmers, the Delta fish and wildlife or the people of Southern California. At a minimum, Southern Californians should oppose any plan to dump degraded ground water into the aqueduct, demand an immediate halt to the delivery of irrigation water on high-selenium farmland and demand that funding be found for the U.S. Geological Survey to design and oversee the monitoring program of any drainage entering the San Joaquin River.

No portion of the San Luis Drain should be reopened until that monitoring program is in place. The health of Southern Californians, the San Joaquin River and the Bay/Delta are at stake.

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